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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA SAYS HE, SLEIMAN, PROACTIVE
WITH HIZBALLAH IN GAZA AFTERMATH

REF: BEIRUT 1805

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) On December 31, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora informed the Ambassador and DCM that the GOL was taking a proactive approach with Hizballah in response to the situation in Gaza. He and President Sleiman were in contact with Hizballah officials daily, Siniora said, as well as with leaders of the Palestinian factions in Lebanon, warning them that a conflict in South Lebanon was not what the Lebanese people needed or wanted. The Ambassador urged the PM to ask the Lebanese delegation in Cairo to support a Gaza ceasefire that would be fully respected, permanent, and sustainable. The GOL, Siniora said, supported a Doha Arab summit attended by heads of state, but revealed the Arab League had not yet reached a quorum of 15 participants. An immediate ceasefire, opening of points of entry, and the restoration of law and order were important to ending the crisis in Gaza, Siniora said. In addition, the GOL encouraged Palestinian and Arab solidarity.

2. (C) Siniora blamed "Iranian fingers" for current problems in the region and suggested an Arab-international force could be useful to restore calm. In a separate conversation with Ambassador, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt echoed Siniora's dismay with the Iranians and also ruled out the possibility of a Lebanese-Israeli confrontation as the result of the Gaza situation. On another issue, Siniora was not aware of funding problems for the provision of U.S. M-60 tanks to Lebanon from Jordan, but said he would look into the matter. Siniora said he believed the last four years had not been good for Lebanon, and did not appear to have a positive view of the start of 2009. End summary.

GOL TAKING PROACTIVE APPROACH WITH
HIZBALLAH, OTHER FOREIGN LEADERS

3. (C) In a December 31 meeting with Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his aide, Rola Nouredine, the Ambassador conveyed to Siniora that the U.S. sought to find a way to bring about an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that was fully respected, permanent, and sustainable. The

U.S. hoped that the Arab League statement to be drafted today in Cairo would include mention of a return to the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, which would address the issue of humanitarian access to Gaza, and a reference to ending the illegal smuggling in Gaza. Ambassador also highlighted U.S. plans to contribute \$85 million to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for humanitarian assistance. Siniora commented that the GOL was also supportive of an immediate ceasefire and argued that a solution needed to be agreed quickly because the humanitarian situation in Gaza was growing worse every day. The opening of points of entry and the restoration of law and order were also important, he added. He noted that he had spoken with the Secretary over the previous weekend, and also held telephone conversations with several European foreign ministers, including, the British, French, Italian, and Spanish FMs, as well as FM Javier Solana of the European Union.

¶4. (C) Ambassador raised concerns about how Hizballah might act during the Gaza operation, emphasizing that Hizballah must be dissuaded or prevented from doing anything that would lead to a deterioration of the situation in the south. Siniora reported that he and President Sleiman were in daily contact with Hizballah's senior officials, warning them that a conflict in south Lebanon was not what the Lebanese people needed or wanted. Siniora said these overtures to Hizballah were "received well." He and Sleiman also maintained regular contact with Speaker Nabih Berri on the need to keep the south calm. (Note: Berri, the highest Shia official in the GOL and Amal party leader, has a vested interest in keeping

BEIRUT 00001808 002 OF 003

the south calm at present because he plans to host a meeting of the Arab Inter-parliamentary Union in Tyre in the coming days. End note.) Siniora noted that the GOL had acted proactively from the beginning of the crisis in Gaza to "respond to the mood of the people."

¶5. (C) The Ambassador praised the GOL's outreach efforts to maintain calm and stability in Lebanon in response to the situation in Gaza as well as the work of the ISF and LAF in controlling demonstrations. However, she asked Siniora about the recent discovery of eight Katyusha rockets in the southern Naqura region by a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) patrol. Siniora said the LAF investigation into the source of the rockets was ongoing. He said it was not clear if Hizballah or elements from the Ain el Hilweh Palestinian camps were involved. In either case, he said, it was important for the GOL to continue its outreach efforts.

¶6. (C) The GOL continued to push for Arab and Palestinian solidarity, he said. Siniora called recent "barking" among the Arab countries and Egypt unhelpful. Although an emergency meeting of Arab League foreign ministers was scheduled in Cairo for the same day, Siniora revealed the Arab League's member states did not yet have a quorum for a summit of heads of state, to be held in Doha possibly on Friday, January 2. Lebanon was only the tenth country to support the meeting out of a required 15-member quorum, he said. He added that both Egypt and Saudi Arabia were undecided. Siniora said the mood in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps was full of anger and helplessness and could be dangerous if solidarity was not maintained.

¶7. (C) (Note: In a subsequent conversation December 31 with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, the Ambassador noted Jumblatt's comments to the press the day before, ruling out "the possibility of an Israeli confrontation with Lebanon (as a result of the Gaza confrontation).") It was important for Lebanese political leaders to reinforce the need to prevent Hizballah from taking any action that could unravel the situation in the south, she said. Jumblatt agreed, noting that he had made these statements to both local and Iranian media. He also criticized Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's remarks attacking Egypt and other Arab states.

It was necessary for the various Palestinian factions to unite to confront the situation in Gaza, Jumblatt added. End Note.)

"IRANIAN FINGERS" EVERYWHERE

18. (C) Turning to the situation in Gaza, Siniora said he believed it was impossible to "exclude Iranian fingers" from all that has happened. Whatever the "short-sightedness or misbehavior of the Israelis," Hamas was "completely in the hands of the Iranians," he surmised. The Iranians, he continued, had painted many of the region's actors into their respective corners. He blamed Iran for forcing Hamas to show its strength; forcing the Israelis to also show their strength in the run-up to their elections in February and as a result of their defeat in 2006; and "striking out" against the Egyptians and the Saudis. Siniora also believed Iran, through Hamas, was sending a message to Syria in response to its indirect talks with Israel.

PM SUPPORTIVE OF ARAB-INTERNATIONAL FORCE

19. (C) Siniora said he favored the idea of creating an Arab or international force to restore law and order in the Gaza Strip. The idea of an Arab force would be worth exploring, Siniora said, if the participating countries were viewed as non-partisan. Siniora suggested that soldiers from Morocco, Mauritania, or Tunisia would be acceptable, and potentially, regiments could be on the ground within a week or two. If the force were expanded to include other countries, Siniora believed Turkey, Bangladesh, and Indonesia could possibly contribute troops.

PM UNAWARE OF FUNDING ISSUE FOR M-60s

BEIRUT 00001808 003 OF 003

10. (C) Separately, when the Ambassador raised concerns about securing the additional \$98 million in funding to complete the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Lebanon and Jordan for the third party transfer of U.S. M-60 tanks, Siniora professed to be unaware of the issue. The Ambassador passed the PM a copy of the draft for his reference and study. (Note: DefMin Murr had told Ambassador last week that he had briefed the PM on the need for GOL funding of \$98 million for the remaining 56 M-60 tanks. End note.)

COMMENT

11. (C) Siniora closed the meeting by wishing the Ambassador a "Happy New Year," but continued that 2008 was not an auspicious year. "Come to think of it," he said, "nor was 2007, nor 2006, nor 2005." Although Siniora did not make a prediction for 2009, it was obvious he believed the beginning of 2009 would be as stressful and tense for the GOL as in years past. The positive news, however, is that he and President Sleiman tell us they are trying to take a proactive stance to put Hizballah on notice regarding its activities in the South. From Siniora's discussion of the Katyushas, we believe the GOL is seeking to limit any wayward Palestinian activities (or Hizballah actions masquerading as such) in South Lebanon, as well. End comment.

SISON